

Remembering Phil Everly

BY PETER STONE BROWN

I probably first heard the Everly Brothers when I was a real little kid about six or seven, playing in the driveway behind my family's Northeast Philly row house blasting out of one of the ever present transistor radios that belonged to the bigger kids. I'm not sure if it was "Bye Bye Love" or "Wake Up Little Susie," but most definitely "Bird Dog." You couldn't escape it. Once in awhile I might catch them on TV and they always seemed to have this nervous energy. And for the next few years they were always on the radio, hit after hit. And then they weren't.

Move forward about eight years, and I'm 14 or 15, and I borrow two Everly Brothers album from a friend, *The Everly Brothers' Best* on Cadence Records, and *The Everly Brothers' Golden Hits* on Warner Brothers. I still have those records and I never stopped playing them. And it wasn't just the hit songs either. It was the acoustic guitars and the twangy electric leads and the incredible close harmonies. My favorite song on the Cadence album was "I Wonder If I Care As Much," an original written by both of them with this powerful almost eerie steel guitar. And my favorite on the later Warner Brothers album was "Cathy's Clown," with another brilliant arrangement from the piano to the almost marching drums.

Sometime in either late '68 or early '69, I'm living in New York and I hear a friend of mine who would later record with a group called Borderline sing a Merle Haggard song, "Sing Me Back Home," that totally knocked me out. I'm not sure if he told me at the time it was a Merle Haggard song, but a couple of days later, I was in Sam Goody's and I come across this Everly Brothers album called *Roots* and there's that song. Instant buy! By this time I was slowly starting to listen to country music, and thanks to The Byrds, country rock was starting to take hold.

Roots was a concept album recorded around the height of concept albums, and it was the Everly Brothers going backwards and forwards at once, singing "You Done Me Wrong" written by George Jones and Ray Price, and "T for Texas" by Jimmy Rodgers, but also covering Randy Newman. Interspersed every now and then between the songs were sound clips of them as kids playing on their dad's radio show. The Everly Brothers were the real deal, part of a singing family, learning to play from their dad Ike who played with the likes of Merle Travis. Very early in their career, they recorded an album of old folk ballads and country songs called *Songs Our Daddy Taught Us*. They

were the real deal! The arrangements on *Roots* were experimental and adventurous. A wah wah guitar on Haggard's "Mama Tried," a new version of my favorite song, "I Wonder If I Care As Much," with a sustained almost fuzz guitar crying over gently finger-picked acoustics replaced the pedal steel. The album should have put them at the forefront of the country rock movement. But it ended up being an album only a few knew about and treasured.

Not long after buying that album, I was in that same Sam Goody's and the salesman who knew me by now asked, if I wanted to go see the Everly Brothers that night. Of course, I said yes. He said meet me at the Bitter End. As we were standing in line, they walked into the club right in front of us. Onstage, they of course had their black Everly Brothers Gibson guitars and played hit after hit and also the new songs from *Roots* including "I Wonder If I Care As Much." And they projected that same nervous energy and tension I remembered from seeing them on TV, and their band and of course their harmonies were faultless. No one sang closer tighter harmonies than the Everly Brothers.

A year later they became the summer replacement for Johnny Cash's TV show, which resulted in their last album for Warner Brothers. Neither the album or the TV caught on. Then two years later they signed to RCA Records and recorded an album featuring songs by some of the best songwriters at the time including Jesse Winchester and Kris Kristofferson, but it didn't take. A year later they returned to Nashville and Chet Atkins and made a good but not great album, *Pass The Chicken & Listen*, but it was almost as if they were trying too hard. Not long after its release, they broke up onstage with Phil Everly smashing his guitar and walking off.

They stayed apart for 10 years trying various things on their own with Phil Everly having some success in England. In 1983, guitarist Albert Lee convinced them to reunite. Their reunion concert in London at Royal Albert Hall where all their powers were triumphantly intact, was released as a live album and a video. They followed that up with a new studio album, *EB 84* produced by Dave Edmunds that opened with a song written especially for them by Paul McCartney, "On The Wings Of A Nightingale" and featured their first Bob Dylan cover, "Lay Lady Lay." Two years later, another album *Born Yesterday* found them still engaged covering country punkers Rank And File, as well as Mark Knopfler. It was their last good studio album. Their final album two years later, *Some Hearts* despite original material was keyboard dominated and seemed to be an attempt to get a contemporary late '80s sound while ignoring everything they were really about.

Following their reunion, they toured for about 20 more years. I saw them many, many times. Albert Lee remained their lead guitarist, and their band often featured such Nashville greats as Buddy Emmons. And at every show they'd do all their hits and include a special part where they played the songs their daddy taught them, and sometimes some newer songs. And of course their harmonies - Phil usually sang the high parts though they could mix it up and Don always sang the solo verses - were impeccable. But as real as they were and as good as they were, and even though they were always on the top of their game musically, they were playing to an oldies crowd, and so they did the oldies. For whatever reason, they were never embraced by the hip elite as the next big old thing.

The Everly Brothers sold more records than any other duo in history. The people they influenced from Buddy Holly to the Beatles to Simon & Garfunkel and Dylan on up is beyond remarkable. Rock and Roll and country rock would not have been what it is without them. And it's too damn bad that they were relegated to the sidelines and the cutout bins when they still had so much to contribute.

Phil Everly died today from COPD at 74. An era is quickly coming to an end and he was one of the giants.

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